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Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Uptown to Bushwick, It's Charles Atlas's Globe

by [brienne walsh](#) 02/29/12

Charles Atlas knows he's having a moment. Not only does he have his first solo show in New York, "The Illusion of Democracy," currently at Luhring Augustine Bushwick; he has contributed two works to the Whitney Biennial, *Ocean* (2008), a feature-length film that documents a Merce Cunningham Dance Company performance in a Minnesota granite quarry, and a live video performance with the electronic music composer William Basinski. "It's a long time coming," the artist told *A.i.A.* "It's nice that New York finally gets to see some of my work."



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The Brooklyn show comprises two silent video installations, *Plato's Alley* (2009) and *Painting By Numbers* (2008), larger-than-life light projections of vertical lines, grids, and the numbers 1–6. They explore what Atlas calls "number-ness," a term he coined to describe the idea that numbers, even if they couldn't be expressed in language, would still exist in a world without humans. Atlas carefully chose the numbers he used in the installation so that they couldn't be read as an expression of some kind of algorithm or codedwriting. In the end, he used the numbers 1–6 because six figures is the normal amount of numerals you can use in your head without dividing them into smaller units. "In every piece, I try to do something I haven't done before," Atlas explained. "When I started with the numbers, I didn't know where it was going, and it just arrived here."

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Atlas was hesitant to elaborate on the significance of the exhibition title, saying, "It's just something people might think about." But in *Plato's Alley* he references Plato's allegory of the cave, in which prisoners chained to a wall do not realize that the shadows they see are not reality. In the work, which was originally installed in a narrow alley in London, the numbers loom large, almost godly, proceeding in sequence behind rectangular lines from the cove where they begin and where they are trapped in a grid. In *Painting By Numbers*, on the other hand, the numbers, in a smaller, less weighted font, seem to be used purely for visual effect, moving across the walls like stock tickers on a billboard, forming geometric patterns, floating like stars in space, and eventually converging into a swarm that blurs into a smear of white and then explodes, leaving the walls on which they were projected completely black. "I wanted to make them as abstract and inhuman as possible," Atlas said.

The effect of the exhibition, rather than being particularly political or thought-provoking, is akin to relaxing with a good book, or letting yourself be lulled into sleep by shadows on a wall. "It doesn't look like any work I've done before," Atlas said. "I tried to imagine I was an unknown artist with a different sensibility."

The pieces Atlas will show at the Whitney will be more familiar to fans of his work, which has historically involved live performance, dance and collaborations with other artists including choreographer Michael Clark, Marina Abramovic and Antony and the Johnsons. From Apr. 11–14, *Ocean* will screen daily in the Emily Fisher Landau galleries on the museum's fourth floor, which has been designated as a performance space for the Biennial. It will be followed by Atlas's weeklong residency in the space, which will include music and video projections in collaboration with Basinski. On Apr. 20 and 21, Atlas will stage two live performances.

Finally, the artist will contribute lighting to Clark's live rehearsals and performances with both professional and nonprofessional dancers, which will be staged as part of Clark's four-week residency at the museum.

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